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Guest Editors' Introduction: Debating Capital, Spectacle, and Modernity

Alex Jeffrey, Colin McFarlane, and Alex Vasudevan

"Crisis" is a repeated trope of spectacle itself, always flashing up the doom and fascination of modernity in some anguished new shape on the screen.

—RETORT, *Afflicted Powers*

On first inspection, we see an image of a crammed kitchen, unwashed dishes carelessly stacked on an aluminum stove and in a half-filled sink (fig. 1). A pink plastic pitcher, an empty egg carton, an unfinished bowl of soup, and a discarded orange peel suggest a banal still life. Yet what reads like a prosaic domestic scene is, on closer inspection, itself a reconstruction, a paper model whose minute imperfections—an exposed edge, a visible pencil mark—draw attention to the very mechanisms of its making.¹ Thomas Demand's *Kitchen* derives from a news photograph of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's hideaway near his hometown of Tikrit, where he was forced to take refuge during the American invasion in 2003. Like all of Demand's large-format mural-size images, *Kitchen* is based on a three-dimensional life-size sculpture that Demand him-

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1. Roxana Marcoci, "Paper Moon," in *Thomas Demand* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 10.



Figure 1 *Kitchen/Küche*, 2004. 33 × 165 cm. C-Print/Diasac © Thomas Demand, VG BildKunst, Bonn/DACS, London

self constructed from colored paper and cardboard. While Demand's approach to photography draws heavily on images culled from mass-media spectacle, "the architecture he finds within [them]," as one author opines, "is completely unspectacular."²

To be sure, numerous commentators have already highlighted the complex affiliations between the "aesthetic" and the "political," which have increasingly come to underwrite the contemporary war on terror.³ "We are living," writes

2. Beatriz Colomina, "Media as Modern Architecture," in *Thomas Demand, Serpentine Gallery* (London: Serpentine Gallery; Munich: Mosel, 2006), 19.

3. Dora Apel, "Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib," *Art Journal* 62 (2005): 88–100; Mark Danner, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2004); Allen Feldman, "The Actuarial Gaze: From 9/11 to Abu Ghraib," *Cultural Studies* 19 (2005): 203–26; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Derek Gregory,

T. J. Clark, “through a terrible moment in the politics of imagining, envisioning, visualizing,” a moment increasingly characterized by the dismantling, in Clark’s words, “of so many forms of *resistance* to the image—so many of the forms of life in which the image-life of power could once be derided or spoken back to.”⁴ Demand’s unique working method would seem, in this respect, to “speak back” and resist the very terms of a revived, emboldened alignment of “spectacle” and “violence” and its particular configuration of aesthetics and politics. *Kitchen* is, we would argue, completely at odds with terror’s scopic regime, whether it is the spectacular collapse of the World Trade Center on 9/11, the grainy videos of kidnapped hostages in Iraq, the photographs of tortured prisoners at Abu Ghraib, or the MTV-inspired videos made by American soldiers on YouTube.

Revisiting the relationship among violence, capital accumulation, and image control is a central aim of RETORT’s *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*. Described as “venomous and poetic” by Michael Hardt and as “part analysis, part manifesto” by Noam Chomsky, the book is a polemic that combines key Marxist concepts (e.g., primitive accumulation) with notions of spectacle and violence.⁵ RETORT is a collective, based for the past two decades in the San Francisco Bay Area, comprising Iain Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts. In *Afflicted Powers* RETORT draws on the work of Guy Debord and the Situationist International to argue that “the present condition of politics does not make sense unless it is approached from a dual perspective—seen as a crude struggle for material dominance, but also (threaded ever closer into that struggle) as a battle to control appearances.”⁶ In charting the material and spectacular rationalities of U.S. foreign policy, RETORT suggests that Debord’s twinned notions of “the colonization of everyday life” and “the society of the spectacle” need to be urgently recast in terms that do full justice to their original intent. RETORT’s purpose is to “make them instruments of political analysis again, directed to an understanding of the powers and vulnerabilities of

“Vanishing Points: Law, Violence, and Exception in the Global War Prison,” in *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror, and Political Violence*, ed. Derek Gregory and Allan Pred (London: Routledge, 2006), 205–36; Wendy Hesford, “Staging Terror,” *Drama Review* 50 (2006): 29–41; W. J. T. Mitchell, “The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable,” *English Literary History* 72 (2005): 291–308.

4. T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006), 121; “In Conversation: T. J. Clark with Kathryn Tuma,” *Brooklyn Rail*, November 2006, brooklynrail.org/2006/11/art/tj-clark.

5. “Incisive Retort: Michael Hardt on *Afflicted Powers*,” *ArtForum* 44, no. 2 (2005): 2. The quotation from Chomsky comes from the cover of *AP*.

6. RETORT, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso, 2005), 31. Cited throughout this dossier as *AP*.

the capitalist state” (AP, 17). Where Debord’s analysis was often world-historical in its totalizing remit, RETORT counters with a more contingent and matter-of-fact version of the spectacle (AP, 19). In the collective’s own words: “We wanted to find ways of taking spectacle seriously as a term of political explanation without turning it into the key to all mysteries. In a word, the concept needed to be desacralized. It needed to be applied, locally and conjuncturally—to dirty its hands with the details of politics.”⁷ We believe that such a realignment of the material and the visual necessitates engagement and response. The following commentaries emerge from a panel discussion examining *Afflicted Powers* at the 2006 Association of American Geographers conference in Chicago. These essays provide a challenging set of observations concerning RETORT’s analysis of the contemporary geopolitical moment, in particular its theorization of the spectacle, the nature of U.S. imperialism, and the politics of modernity.

Afflicted Powers identifies a world torn by atavism and newfangledness. It is unapologetic in its totalization, written in a long tradition of pamphleteering, and attempts to map the coordinates of a familiar yet new “military neoliberalism.” Opening with an account of the U.S. state’s “spectacular defeat” on September 11, 2001, RETORT illustrates the complex entanglement of materiality with the production of images in the recent political and military maneuvers of the Bush administration. In examining the current geopolitical moment, the authors draw expansive conclusions regarding the “colonization of everyday life,” a process they describe as “globalization turned inward . . . mapping and enclosing the hinterland of the social, and carving out from the detail of human inventiveness an ever more ramified and standardized market of exchangeable subjectivities” (AP, 20). As RETORT ultimately argues, in a world saturated with “images, instructions, slogans, logos, false promises, virtual realities [and] miniature happiness motifs,” the Left needs “sightlines in a new, nightmarish, terrain” (AP, 8, 15). It is these sightlines, they declare, that *Afflicted Powers* provides.

Chapter 2 (“Blood for Oil?”) takes issue with the popular notion that the war in Iraq is all about oil. It begins by outlining the “blood for oil” argument, then contextualizes the oil imperative in a broader context of “military neoliberalism.” RETORT argues that oil must be viewed in relation to a wider strategy of “opening” Iraq for capital: “a radical, punitive ‘extra-economic’ restructuring of the conditions necessary for expanded profitability—paving the way, in short, for new rounds of US-led dispossession and capital accumulation. This was a

7. RETORT, “An Exchange on *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (with Hal Foster),” *October*, no. 105 (2006): 3–12.

hyper-nationalist neoliberal putsch, made in the name of globalization and free-market democracy" (AP, 72). Chapter 3 ("Permanent War") provides a historical discussion of U.S. imperialism and positions the Bush administration as part of a *longue durée*, rather than the instigation of a new imperial moment.⁸ Perhaps most compellingly, RETORT argues that what passes for peace has in fact come to represent an "endless series of wars" (AP, 93).⁹ Times of "peace" in the United States are in fact often times of war elsewhere: that the violence integral to the vagaries of primitive accumulation occurs "out there" is enough to maintain the facade of peace "over here." In making this argument, RETORT locates U.S. imperial conquest in an unbroken line stretching back almost two hundred years, marking a "state of permanent war—of a long and consistent pattern of military expansionism in the service of empire . . . from the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 through the Cold War to the present" (AP, 81). In recent years, they contend, this ongoing imperialism-war-capital rubric has neoliberalized, leading to the hollowing out of state welfare functions, the increasingly corporate nature of policy formulation, and the "infusion of handouts and investment with various neo-liberal conditions attached," which often follows U.S. military interventions (AP, 100). While this Euro-American narrative of neoliberal capitalist development on its own is not new, RETORT provocatively suggests that it corresponds to the development of "weak citizenship," or what Cindi Katz neatly refers to as "flailing consumership" (this issue). Specular citizenship thus conceived acts as a mirror to the actions of the U.S. state, whereby rights and responsibilities morph into the twinned practices of accumulation and consumption.

Chapter 4 ("The Future of an Illusion") focuses on Israel, in particular Israel as a "double identity" of the U.S. state, a symbol of "a market-enriched 'democratic' future: McJerusalem . . . hyper-militarized." Israel has "mirrored and mesmerized" the American state "as exemplar of a society in which total militarization and spectacular modernity were fully compatible" (AP, 111). As Noel Castree writes in his review of the book, this generates "the following fascinating question: 'Did the Iraq invasion follow from the . . . recognition, finally, that Israel's time as projection of the West—and an illusion—has come to an end?'"¹⁰ In other words, can the Iraq invasion "be understood as a delusional attempt to recreate the one-time 'success' of the Israeli lodestar"? (AP, 112). The fifth chapter focuses on revolutionary Islam,

8. See also Neil Smith, *The Endgame of Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2005); and Ann Laura Stoler, "On Degrees of Imperial Sovereignty," *Public Culture* 18 (2006): 125–46.

9. See also Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, esp. chap. 1.

10. Noel Castree, "Capitalism, the Left, and the New World (Dis)order," *Progress in Human Geography* 31 (2007): 563–70.

which brings externalized war to the internal illusion of peace and combines a discussion of atavism (e.g., authoritarian Islam) with hypermodernity (e.g., the media-tization of terror). RETORT situates the informal settlement as a “breeding ground” for the “vanguard ideal” (AP, 173). The “new city dwellers” of Asia and North Africa are positioned (perhaps rather carelessly) as a source of terror, where Islam is “mutating and metastasizing in the slum conurbations of World Bank World” (AP, 172–73). As RETORT’s treatment of the image politics of “revolutionary Islam” attests, spectacular politics are certainly not the domain of the state alone. Indeed, they argue for the need to challenge “the whole texture of modernity” (AP, 189). This is a call for a critique of modernity from the Left that does not fall into familiar alternative (and rightist) tropes of “nostalgia,” “doom,” or “tradition” and that develops a sustained critique of modernity that is “non-nostalgic, non-anathematizing, non-regressive, non-fundamental, non-apologetic”—in short, a critique that offers an alternative political grammar from the vanguard ideal propagated by “revolutionary Islam,” a critique not marked by a desire to “go back” (AP, 185).

But as the interventions in this issue suggest, RETORT could go much farther in positing the study of “spectacular politics” as historically rich, locally varied, and often contradictory.¹¹ For David Campbell, RETORT never fully comes to terms with the dialectical nature of Debord’s original insights on the relationship between image and reality. As Campbell points out in this issue, there is a residual nostalgia for an untainted “Real” where, for example, a more contingent critique of the “theo-econopolitical machine” currently governing America would open a space for greater critical reflection.¹² W. J. T. Mitchell takes a similar view of RETORT’s treatment of spectacle: why not conceive of the spectacle as a site of struggle rather than personifying it as “a Baudrillardian ‘Evil Demon of Images’”? In Mitchell’s view, the totalizing closure of the spectacle remains unavoidable, becoming “too powerful, too all-explanatory” (this issue). Gearóid Ó Tuathail (Gerard Toal) is concerned that “RETORT gives in too much to the pleasures of polemic and hyperbole, encouraging a sweeping critical geopolitics that does not examine the specifics of particular geopolitical crises” (this issue). Katz suggests, in turn, a closer engagement with other social formations through which the ties among politico-economic, military, and spectacular power are sutured, especially the everyday practices and productions of domesticized “homeland” security.

Despite RETORT’s elucidation of the spectacular nature of U.S. imperial sov-

11. See also Alex Jeffrey, Colin McFarlane, and Alexander Vasudevan, “Spectacle, State, Modernity: A Review of *Afflicted Powers*,” *Geopolitics* 12 (2007): 206–22.

12. See William Connolly, “The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine,” *Political Theory* 33 (2005): 869–86.

ereignty and its correspondingly emasculated form of citizenship, for the commentators the authors of *Afflicted Powers* could still say more on the possibility for crisis, uncertainty, and reversals in their plotting of the imperial narrative. More broadly, the focus on the U.S. experience and on the United States as an imperial progenitor contains a bias that effectively casts other histories and geographies of imperialism to the periphery. Although there have been important attempts to write a historical anthropology of imperialism, from the efforts by various “dependency theorists” to theorize underdevelopment in relation to colonialism and neocolonialism,¹³ as well as by scholars of colonization and decolonization (including Frantz Fanon and Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak of the subaltern studies school),¹⁴ precious few recent interventions have built on these efforts. The now-familiar shape of an emboldened American imperium has raised new questions about the nature of what Derek Gregory has called “the colonial present” and the perceived “exceptionalism” of U.S. imperialism.¹⁵ It is important to recognize the value, when we read *Afflicted Powers*, of “looking comparatively” at the technologies of imperialism that are both particular to a time and space and resonant with wider global practices.¹⁶ James Ferguson’s work points, for example, to modes of Chinese imperialism at work in new forms of enclave capitalism through mineral extraction in various areas of southern Africa.¹⁷ Despite the growing focus on U.S. imperialism, we need to remain attentive to other instances of imperial enclosure if we are to work toward a more comparative understanding of empire that is capable of grappling with different degrees of imperial sovereignty.¹⁸ This concern with the enclosures of the colonial present also informs a wider set of issues that animate our own project of analyzing the interarticulation of neoliberal norms and a resurgent and violent form of geopolitics.¹⁹ That the “transformational sequence appropriation-displacement-

13. See Samir Amin, *Imperialism and Unequal Development* (Hassocks: Harvester, 1977); and Amin, *Obsolescent Capitalism: Contemporary Politics and Global Disorder* (London: Zed, 2003).

14. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Paladin, 1970); Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

15. Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (London: Blackwell, 2004).

16. Ann Laura Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post)colonial Studies,” in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 23.

17. James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).

18. Emma Mawdsley, “China and Africa: Emerging Challenges to the Geographies of Power,” *Geography Compass* 1 (2007): 405–21.

19. Alexander Vasudevan, Colin McFarlane, and Alex Jeffrey, “Spaces of Enclosure,” *Geoforum* (forthcoming).

exploitation-accumulation” is, in this context, operative across a range of scales, sites, and networks is quite clear.²⁰ That this very sequence operates contingently, provisionally, and violently still merits, we believe, further critical clarification.

In the case of RETORT, this is partly resolved through the rearticulation of a broader argument about war. The collective writes, “War, in a word, is modernity incarnate” (AP, 79). For RETORT, warfare’s destruction of infrastructure is a service to capital, setting the stage for “the trinity of crude accumulation: the enclosure and looting of resources; the creation of a cheap and deracinated labor force; and the establishment of captive markets” (AP, 100). For us, RETORT points in this instance to a critical relationship among war, modernity, and infrastructure, a relationship that blurs the boundaries between war and peace. In the destruction of water, sewage, electricity, communication, and transport infrastructures, war is increasingly an act of “de-modernization” that targets “dual-use infrastructures” (military and civilian) and that permeates everyday life long after the bombing has stopped.²¹ There are echoes here of Hardt and Antonio Negri’s discussion of war as central to the reproduction of social life,²² where state descriptions of everyday life as potential terrorist target legitimizes, in Stephen Graham’s words, “the deepening of national security controls, the post-9/11 surveillance ‘surge,’ and the notion that continuous, pre-emptive and expeditionary wars must be waged by the US to safeguard the securitized cities of ‘homeland’ from the pervasive yet vague anxieties of permanent ‘terror.’”²³ In the context of such securitized and militarized social life, RETORT argues that the Left must focus critique on both military neoliberalism and the modernity with which it is entangled. If *Afflicted Powers* only begins the process of addressing such critiques, it demonstrates the possibilities of collaborative work by producing a critical and distinct contribution to our understanding of contemporary imperialism that reveals the urgent need to reformulate critique. With faith in the possibility of alternative horizons, we hope that this collection echoes this spirit of conversation and action.

20. Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 19.

21. Philip Agre, “Imagining the Next War: Infrastructural Warfare and the Conditions of Democracy,” *Radical Urban Theory*, polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/war.html (accessed August 8, 2006); Stephen Graham, ed., *Cities, War, and Terrorism: Towards an Urban Geopolitics* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004).

22. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, esp. chap. 1.

23. Stephen Graham, “Switching Cities Off: Urban Infrastructure and US Air Power,” *City* 9 (2005): 189.